



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 3 October 2024

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

- Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
- Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
- Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA
- Mr Maurice Bradley MLA (via Zoom)
- Ms Ciara Ferguson (Deputy Chairperson) MLA
- Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
- Mr Brian Kingston MLA
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA

Apologies:

- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

In Attendance:

- Ms Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
- Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)
- Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
- Ms Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)



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The meeting commenced in open session at 10.01a.m.

Andy Allen declared an interest as a person with a disability.

1. Apologies

Apologies are listed above.

2. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's Business to report.

3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 26 September 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes as drafted.

4. Matters Arising



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The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from the Arts Council on the working and living conditions of artists research it commissioned.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Arts Council to ask how the advisory group members were identified and what plans are in place to mitigate against the current fiscal challenges. The letter is also to inform the Arts Council that the Committee is planning an engagement event for the arts in late January 2025.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental update on the welfare supplementary payments waiver facility.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for further information on the exceptionality criteria when there is an overpayment and whether, if there hasn't been an overpayment on health grounds, official error would be considered.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Ministerial reply to the Committee's request for a briefing on the current budgetary situation. The Minister will brief at the meeting on 7 November

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from the BBC in relation to Committee queries in relation to the accessibility of local news services.

Agreed: That a further letter is sent to the BBC to state that the Committee was disappointed with the response as it failed to address the Committee's initial question in relation to the requirements that are placed upon the BBC under the terms of the Licence Fee to provide accessible content on live broadcast TV. The Committee requested an answer to this question and would also like to know if the BBC is aware that the Sign Language Bill which is expected to be forthcoming in the next months is likely to include provision for both BSL and ISL sign language. The Committee feels that the decision of the BBC to no longer have signers on the local lunchtime news is a regressive step and would like to know what, if any, engagement there was with the deaf community prior to taking this decision.



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Maurice Bradley joined the meeting via Zoom at 10.09a.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from the TEO Committee in relation to work on an anti-poverty strategy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to ask if Officials could urgently brief the Committee on the draft anti-poverty strategy as the Committee would like to know about the level of engagement to date on the strategy and whether the publication of it is imminent.

Members noted a copy of the House of Commons research paper and analysis paper relating to the Online Safety Bill, now Act 2023.

5. Correspondence

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Dept for Communities	Press Release: HED share their highlights and thanks for this year's European Heritage Open Days
QUB	QUB Centre for Public Policy and Administration Launch Event invite to members
Strategic Investment Board	Investment Activity Report
Westminster Energy, Environment and Transport Forum	Decarbonising Home Heating in the UK 2024 conference, Monday, 25th November 2024



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NI Assembly Engagement Office	Invitation to attend Older People's Parliament Saturday 12 October at 1.00pm
Truth Recovery Independent Panel	October information sessions
Dept for Communities	Press Release - Eastern Transport Plan Launch Engagement Report now released
Dept for Communities	Press Release - JobStart 50+ helps Downpatrick customer into work
Dept for Communities	Press Release - Do you know someone who may be eligible for Pension Credit?
Dept for Communities	Press Release - Minister announces funding for Public Realm Scheme in Strabane
Dept for Communities	Press Release - Launch of DfCs new Economic and Social Research Programme

Dept for Communities Press Release on Closure of the NI Resettlement Team.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department, copied to the Executive Office, to say that the Committee feels that the learning from the scheme should be implemented more widely and the Committee is keen for the scheme to continue to deliver as its work has been very valuable in helping vulnerable people from other countries to settle in Northern Ireland.

Dept for Communities Press Release: Launch of New Projects funded through the Access & Inclusion Programme.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask why all councils are not involved in the programme, for more details on the programme, how people can access it and where it is available.



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Westminster Energy, Environment and Transport Forum - Decarbonising Home Heating in the UK 2024 conference, Monday, 25th November 2024.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister expressing the Committee's support for action to bring forward decarbonisation in housing and to ask what conversations the Minister has had with Minister for the Economy or others about progressing the decarbonisation of Housing Executive homes.

Letter from individual re social housing, DfC and legal issues.

Agreed: That a copy of the letter is sent to the Department for comment and to ask the following:

- The average rents across social housing and variation of rents
- The extent of the practice of having tenants on boards and what percentage of Housing Association have tenants on the Board
- Of the 19 Housing Associations, how many are profit making

Ciara Ferguson raised the fact that she welcomed the fact that the Historical Environment fund scheme had reopened.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to welcome the fund being reopened and seeking an explanation of the rationale for Roof Repair stream grant being increased by £3,000 (from £12,000 - £15,000).

The Chairperson informed Members that the meeting would move into closed session to receive advice from the Examiner of Statutory Rules in relation to the statutory rule on the winter fuel payments.

The meeting went into closed session at 10.23a.m.

The Chairperson left the meeting at 10.24 a.m. and Ciara Ferguson, Deputy Chairperson, assumed the Chair.



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6. SR 2024/160 The Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Regulations (NI) 2024 – Advice from Examiner of Statutory Rules

Kellie Armstrong joined the meeting at 10.26 a.m.

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed Angela Kelly, Examiner of Statutory Rules to the meeting and invited her to brief the Committee.

Sian Mulholland joined the meeting at 11.16 a.m.

The Deputy Chairperson thanked Angela for briefing the Committee on the Rule.

The meeting resumed in open session at 11.23 a.m.

7. SR 2024/160 - The Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Regulations (NI) 2024

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that, having just been briefed by the Examiner of Statutory Rules, they now needed to consider the Rule.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister emphasising again that the Committee must have all relevant information in order to undertake scrutiny and to request that the full EQIA is expedited in order that the Committee can consider this Rule before the end of the statutory period on 14 October 2024.

8. SR 2024/174 The Social Security (Infected Blood Capital Disregard) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that the SL1 for this Rule was considered at the meeting on when Members indicated that they were content for the Department to make the Rule.



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Members also noted a response from the Department providing further information in relation to previous Committee queries on Carer's Allowance.

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/174 - The Social Security (Infected Blood Capital Disregard) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024 and has no objection to the rule.

9. Briefing by Disability Action

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Andrea Brown, CEO of Disability Action

Joanne Sansome, Disability Rights Specialist and Author

Nuala Toman, Head of Innovation and Impact, Disability Action

Michael Holden, Chair of the Centre for Independent Living

A question and answer session followed the briefing and the main areas of discussion were engagement with the Department on a disability strategy, the need for a cross departmental approach to disability, budgets, employability support, the Shared Prosperity Fund, engagement with disabled people that run businesses, current disability fora, the need for the establishment of a regional disability forum and the access and inclusion programme.

The Deputy Chairperson thanked the representatives for attending and providing Members with the briefing.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister urging that the Disability Strategy be progressed, that there is urgent engagement with a range of disability fora and to request that the October monitoring opportunity is examined as a means of increasing the access and inclusion programme fund in order to address the needs of those with disabilities. Committee expressed concerns that the rights and representation of people with disabilities is backsliding and emphasised that it is keen to see additional support given to the sector,



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reiterating the need for cross departmental work and ongoing engagement with more diverse stakeholder groups for wider participation.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to all departments stating that the Committee has now heard from a number of groups who have conveyed that disability rights and representation is backsliding and the Committee requesting information on any ongoing work that each department is conducting in relation to engagement with disability fora and their members.

The meeting went into closed session at 12.20p.m.

The meeting resumed in open session at 12.25p.m.

10. Briefing by Action for Children

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Sheena McMullen, Campaigns, Advocacy and Policy Advisor NI

Scott Compton, Senior Policy Advisor and Lead Researcher for Child Poverty and Barriers to Work evidence (via Zoom)

Paul Kellagher - Children's Services Manager, South Western Area

A question and answer session followed the briefing and the main areas of discussion included short and long term priorities, the urgent need for an anti-poverty strategy and the draft Programme for Government, the impact of benefit sanctions on families, the 5 week wait for Universal Credit and statutory sick pay.

The Deputy Chairperson thanked the representatives for attending and providing Members with the briefing.

Brian Kingston left the meeting at 1.03p.m.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 1.05p.m.



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11. Forward Work Programme

Members noted a copy of the forward work programme.

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee was holding an online event with the Youth Assembly from 6-7pm on Tuesday 8 October and encouraged all Members to participate. This was particularly important as the Committee will move to oral evidence sessions in relation to this Bill at the meeting on 10 October when the Committee will hear from 3 organisations and then commence initial deliberations on the clauses of the Bill.

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that the meeting on 24 October that had been scheduled to take place in Derry would now take place at a later date.

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a memo from the Clerk in relation to a Committee response to the draft Programme for Government. This item was deferred for consideration at the meeting on 10 October due to a lack of quorum.

12. Any other business

There was no other business.

13. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10am on Thursday 10 October 2024, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Deputy Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 1.11p.m.



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Ciara Ferguson MLA
Deputy Chairperson, Committee for Communities